NASA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

ERMA COX
INTERVIEWED BY JENNIFER ROSS-NAZZAL
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ROSS-NAZZAL: Today is July 6, 2023. This interview with Erma Cox is being conducted for the NASA Oral History Project. The interview is Jennifer Ross-Nazzal. Thanks again for driving down to Clear Lake and spending some time with me today.

COX: Oh, you're welcome.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I appreciate it. Nice to meet another fellow BAUUC [Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church] member.

COX: Right, it is a good place

ROSS-NAZZAL: I wonder if you would give me a brief overview of your life before you came to work at NASA in '72.

COX: I grew up in Malvern, Arkansas, a small town in the southwestern part of Arkansas. Back then, girls didn't have many options when they got out of high school. You either got married, or you went to college and became a teacher, or a nurse. I came from a large family. I was one of six children, but they were older. My mother was 45 when she had me, and I was unexpected. My father worked for the railroad, the Missouri Pacific Railroad, and he was a telegrapher, which is a

job that doesn't exist anymore. In 1955, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He died within two or three months of being diagnosed, so it was just my mother and me. My brother had just graduated from high school, and he went off to the Navy. Your world changes when one of your parents goes away.

I think my mother always wanted me to stay home with her. That was her goal. But I was very smart in school. I was in the National Honor Society and had the highest GPA when I graduated. Of course I dated, and I met my first husband. He was in college already. He was in the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] at college, Henderson College [Arkadelphia, Arkansas], and he went into two years' active service after he got out of college, because they helped pay his tuition in college. I had graduated from high school in 1962 and got a job working at an insurance agency in Malvern. We got married in November of 1963, and they immediately sent him to Aberdeen, Maryland, so it was like a new world for us! I'd never been out of the state of Arkansas.

While he was in training there, we got to go into Washington D.C. We toured the White House and other parts of Washington. The World's Fair was in New York City that year so we drove up there one weekend to see it. It was a whole new world I had never seen.

Then he got orders to go to White Sands Missile Range [New Mexico], and that was June of 1964. We drove across the country from Aberdeen, Maryland. My mother thought I was going to die. I was pregnant, and she said, "You can't go. You have got to stay here." I said, "No, we're going to White Sands." We had this great big house. We had a three-bedroom house. We got on-site housing, but we're 60 miles from any civilization. The only place you could go was the commissary, and they had an officers' club where we had meetings. There really wasn't much to

do at White Sands Missile Range. I had my first daughter, Cheryl at the hospital at White Sands Missile Range in July of 1964. Back then, the Vietnam War was going on, so he served two years.

He was going to Vietnam if he stayed in the Army, so he decided to get out. He was looking for a job and had heard from somebody they were hiring engineers at NASA in Houston, Texas. He was a mathematician so they hired him on the phone. Said, "Come on down." That's how we got to Houston. He was glad to get the job, and I was a good wife and followed him down here. We lived out in an apartment complex out on the Gulf Freeway for a year or so. Right before my second daughter Beverly was born in '69, we moved into a house in Sagemont.

I thought I'd be married forever. I had the two kids and the responsibility of getting them in school. Then we hit some rough times. He was having an affair. We got divorced. I actually worked before I got married. I worked for a year as a secretary in Malvern for an insurance company and a finance agency. It was run by two brothers. So I had had the skills. I could type, and I took shorthand which I had learned in high school in Malvern.

I had to go take a civil service test to work for NASA. Supposedly, I made the highest grade. Duane [L.] Ross in Personnel said, "You had one of the highest scores I've ever seen on a civil service test." So they hired me as a GS [general schedule]-2 clerk typist, temporary. So I took my chances, because it was going to be hard for me to find a job with young children. I looked at other possibilities, but working with the post office would mean I'd have to work seven days a week, and I had two kids. They asked me where I wanted to work at: the Supply Building or in Building 30. I knew where Building 30 was, so I said, "Building 30."

We were under [Eugene F.] Kranz. I was in one of the divisions, and they put me in the training department. Kranz wanted all the flight controllers to go to these classes. Back then, there was a videotape you checked out, and we basically took care of the training library. My boss was

a real nice guy. I'd always wanted to go to college, because my librarian back in high school said, "You should go to college and become a librarian." I loved books, but I didn't have the chance to do that. Gordon [M.] Ferguson, was the supervisor I had. He said, "Well, why don't you go to night school? NASA will pay for the classes if you can show it relates to your job." Most of the things I took related to my job. I was in business administration. He was going to night school, too. He was trying to get his degree. So I said, "Well, I'll be 42, you know, when I get my degree." He said, "Well, you'll be 42 if you don't get your degree." It made sense for some reason. I really wanted to go, too.

So I was working full time, had two kids, and decided to go to night school. It was really a tough time for me. Of course, one of the things I always remember, I had a GS-2 salary. All my salary went to childcare. I was getting child support, but I was just barely squeaking by.

That's one of the reasons I always had a love of trying to provide on-site childcare, because women need it. They expected you to be the caregiver back then. I wanted to be close to my daughters. It didn't happen when I was working or had children, but it helped future generations. Estella [Hernández Gillette] also was very interested in that also. We formed a committee and made a presentation to Aaron Cohen, center director at JSC. He finally approved that he could find the funding to build a childcare center there. I think it's independent now, but the first building was built because of our advocating for it there at Johnson [Space Center, Houston, Texas]. That's one of my big accomplishments here, but it was a real personal issue, too.

Then when I got to Dryden [Flight Research Center, Edwards, California], I did the same thing. We were out in the desert. Dryden is at Edwards Air Force Base. I guess they call it something different now. Back then, it was Dryden.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, it's [the Neil A.] Armstrong [Flight Research Center] now.

COX: Armstrong. They changed it. The nearest livable place, in my opinion, was Lancaster, California. We were driving 20 miles into the desert every day to get to work. You had to leave your child in a childcare facility off base, because they didn't have any childcare. I think maybe the Air Force had childcare, but we couldn't use their childcare center. They had a childcare center, because their people moved around a lot, so they knew that was a problem.

Finally, one of our big advocates for it, Judy Janisse—she was on travel someplace. I think I was there in the early '90s. We had a little airport at Palmdale that flew down to LAX [Los Angeles International Airport]. Then you could fly out of LAX. Well, she was on a trip and several other employees, too. They were trying to catch the Shuttle flight back, and she got on. It only carried about eight people. Another plane, a big plane—it was foggy down there—crashed into that plane and killed everybody on board the little plane. She was killed. She had two young children.

The women at Dryden went back to management using her death as an incentive. We want to get a childcare center, and we're going to name it the Judy Janisse Childcare Center. We got management to approve it. Unfortunately, about two years after it was built, they decided it was dangerous to have a childcare center there, because something might blow up, and they didn't want the children to be injured. There's always a danger anywhere you live. They turned it into an office building, which I was always very unhappy about. When management says they're going to do something, they usually do it. But we did get it built. That was my passion, helping out with childcare centers.

I jumped into my career. Is there anything else you wanted to know about my growing up years?

ROSS-NAZZAL: No. I was curious, though, about childcare, because I do remember it was an issue for my mom, as well, when she started working, just trying to find someone. What sort of childcare was there in the Clear Lake area? Were you just relying on babysitters, or were there actual daycares?

COX: There were a number of them. I found a really nice lady ran one herself, but she was working on her degree in child development, so she was very interested in children. It wasn't just a place to park them. She taught my girls quite a bit in early childhood development, but it was random. We didn't have any relatives living down here, so we couldn't leave them with parents or anybody. We were both working, so there wasn't any choice except to put them in childcare. It was very expensive in relation to how much I was making at the time. I don't think it's changed. I think the price of childcare has gone up and up.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I've read it's like a second mortgage, because it really is pricy. I did think it was interesting, though, because '72, there was a RIF [reduction in force] going on at the center. Do you have any idea how you were able to be hired?

COX: I was not in a professional area. The RIF was in the professional area. They still needed somebody to type. That was back in the days when you really typed, and if you made a mistake, you had to type it all over again. That was a challenge. The thing is, I didn't type fast, but I could

read. That was my problem. I'd read, and I could make corrections, because engineers can't spell, or at least the ones I worked with couldn't spell. I had to correct what they'd written down. Mostly, it was just a rough draft they'd give me. I could take shorthand, but I didn't use it that much, even when I got a job as a stenographer. That's how you got promoted, by being a stenographer instead of a clerk typist. It depended on the person. Gene Kranz dictated all the time. I remember all the secretaries I used to work with, they'd be in there for four hours. I was usually taking a memo from my boss, and I would be through in maybe 30 minutes. That was a requirement, and depending on your boss, you might or might not use it. It was an interesting time.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What is the role of a clerk typist? For someone who would look at that title today, what would you tell them were your responsibilities?

COX: I was responsible for filing, and we, of course, didn't have computers, so you had to file everything manually, and keep everybody's timecard. We used to have to physically fill out a timecard for each employee and make sure they got up to the division office so they could turn them in. That was always a challenge, getting them to sign their timecard, because you couldn't find them. Typing and making coffee, you know. It was pretty casual. Gordon was my supervisor, and we had two contractors working for us, so usually, back then, there was supposed to be some sort of definition between the contractor and the civil servant, but they were working in the same office with me, so I'd do things for them, too. It didn't make any sense to have them do it themselves, because I wanted to know where everything was anyway. I'd get it filed. I guess they actually made the training films themselves. They had to produce them. I'm not sure exactly how

they produced them. They were doing something specialized, so I was just taking care of the different clerical duties for the office.

It was a fairly easy job. I was looking for another job, and that's the reason I applied over at the directorate office for a GS-5. How did it go? I guess you'd go three, four, and five. I had enough experience. You had to have a certain amount of experience. They had sheets that went out to apply for it, then you contacted Personnel that you were interested, and they would put your name in. If you qualified, they would put your name on the list, and you'd be interviewed by the supervisor. If you got selected, you got the job.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were you interviewed by Gene? Is that who interviewed you?

COX: No. Actually, I moved—it was called Flight Operations Directorate, and Don [Donald T.] Gregory was his administrative officer. He was the one who interviewed me. I didn't work directly for Gene Kranz. It was a big office. Don Gregory was on one side, and then Gene Kranz, and then I think it was [Kenneth S.] Kleinknecht was his last name. They were both directors, but he was over Gene. Gene was deputy director, I think. Then we had another guy in the office, Mel [Melvin F.] Brooks—I'm not making that up—and Warren [J.] North. We had a total of five secretaries in the office. Each director had a secretary, and the two other guys had a secretary, and Don had a secretary, so we had five secretaries.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was there that much work for five secretaries?

COX: It was pretty busy and if someone wasn't there, we covered for each other. Lois [H.] Ransdell worked for Gene Kranz when I first went over there, and then Connie [Constance] Critzos was Kleinknecht's secretary. I was trying to remember. I know Ruby [J.] Summers worked for Warren North, and I can't remember the lady's name who worked for Mel Brooks. It was Connye [J. Lenczewski]. She got to go to Russia. This was back during Skylab. We all helped each other out. If one was out, we would do whatever was needed for the other secretary, for the work to get done. It worked out. Don was really nice to me. We got along.

The only person I had a problem with was Connie Critzos. She was a micromanager. She'd come out and check and make sure I'd done everything correctly. She wanted me to do it a certain way. I was a GS-4, and she was a GS-7, so I had to listen to her. She may have been a little bit higher. She thought she ran the whole show. Kleinknecht couldn't have an appointment without her approving it. She was very controlling.

Everything changed when George [W.S.] Abbey came in, though. She thought she'd get the same job, but they replaced her, because he didn't want her. We got another secretary. I remember her name was—I think it's the same as my daughter's name, Cheryl [H. Cheryl Bouillion]. Abbey ran a completely different show.

That's about the time I decided I wanted to get another promotion, and I wasn't going to get a promotion in that office. I didn't want to work for Gene Kranz. He was a former Air Force officer and very tough to please. Of course, Abbey had his way of doing things, too. That's when I applied for the job in the Equal Opportunity Programs Office, because it was an office, but it was on the senior staff, so it was a little more prestigious than being one of five in a directorate office. A lot of people didn't want to apply for it, because it was in the EEO [Equal Employment

Opportunity] Office. I said, "Well, I'll do the same work there that I do anyplace else, so why wouldn't I?"

ROSS-NAZZAL: I don't understand that. Why wouldn't they want to apply? Was there a stigma attached to it?

COX: I was working for a Black supervisor [Joseph D. Atkinson, Jr.]. Usually a minority would get the position. He was very disorganized, so I got his files in order. He liked me right away. He thought I was just the best thing in the world. I was really thankful. He supported my going to college, whatever I needed. I could get off early sometimes, make up the time, to go to a class that I needed that semester. So I made sure he got everything he needed done. It was a good relationship. He was working on his doctorate, and I would come in on the weekends and type on his doctorate.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think we have a copy of his dissertation in our office.

COX: Yes, he worked on it a long time. He was very, very diligent. My granddaughter out in California, she's at UC [University of California] Davis, and she will turn 28 this year. She still doesn't have her doctorate yet. She graduated from Tufts University [Medford, Massachusetts]. She's really smart. I think she's going to get it in December. In her case, she's a teaching assistant, and I don't think they want to lose her. It's more in the scientific world. She's working with chimpanzees. That was tough during COVID, too, because they didn't want anybody taking COVID into the chimps.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Hard to do research in a lab. If you're at home, you can't really Zoom that in.

COX: Yes. Anyway, he was working on his doctorate. We had a nice group in the office. We had diversity in the office. Jose [R.] Perez was the deputy, and then Ginny [Virginia B.] Hughes worked there. She was the Federal Women's Program manager. The only other white person in the office was Jim [James J.] Gorman. He did the discrimination complaints. Then I got to meet Shirley [K.] Price. I don't know if you've heard about Shirley Price.

ROSS-NAZZAL: No.

COX: Shirley Price, she was so smart. I guess her mother had taken thalidomide or whatever it was back then, so she was a dwarf. She had no arms. She learned to type with her toes. She got hired at NASA as a GS-2, also, and she had her degree. They had her in the Personnel Office. They were trying to hire a diverse workforce. She came over to our office to become the handicapped program manager. I guess we don't say handicapped anymore, do we?

ROSS-NAZZAL: I don't think so.

COX: We say disabled. She wouldn't let you do anything. She drove her own car. She had it set up so that with her short arms she could turn the wheel, and she had the brake adjustment moved up so she could do the accelerator and the brakes. I rode with her all the time. I was fine. Matter of fact, she pulled in the handicapped parking spot one day, and I was getting out of the car on the

right-hand side. A guy came up to me and said, "You can't park here. You're not handicapped." She came around the other side of the car and said, "What are you talking about?" He backed off. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry." He thought the person driving the car would be an able-bodied person.

I used to travel with her. They were always wanting her to come speak at different events. Went up to St. Louis. She did a program up there for the Federal Women's Program. We went to a lot of different places, travel-wise. I'd help her with getting the suitcases and certain other things. She insisted on doing everything herself that she could.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How did the office differ from working in Flight Operations and Flight Control?

COX: I was still a secretary, but it seemed like I interacted with them easier. The engineers, I didn't have much to say to them. I was more, "How soon do you want this?" I got to know some of the flight controllers real good, but they were working their job. "I need copies of this." It was the same thing in the EEO Office, but I got interested in what they were doing. We'd plan programs, and we had speakers coming in. I had to type up orders for people that were flying in from different parts of the country. Usually, travel orders were pretty boring things to type up, but got a little more variety in the things I did.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Did you feel like you were more a part of a team, I wonder? Is that how you might describe it?

COX: Yes, I think so. Dr. Atkinson always had staff meetings, and he wanted me to sit in on every staff meeting. I never went to a staff meeting in the directorate, because I was a secretary. But he insisted I come, and everybody listened to me.

I probably shouldn't tell this story, but we had different visitors come to the office. One time, we had a EEO officer from another center. He brought his wife with him, and his wife was white. He was a Black man. Dr. Atkinson was trying to be equal, so he insisted on serving the coffee. He was going around pouring the coffee. I had made it. He asked the EEO officer's wife, "Would you like sugar and cream in your coffee?" And she says, "No, I like it black, like I like my men." He almost dropped the coffeepot. He didn't want to offend anybody either. He wasn't sure what to do with that remark.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned that he invited you to meetings, and you felt like you got to participate more. Do you remember throwing out any ideas that they took forward that you had come up with?

COX: That was during the time we were trying to get the child development center, and he was very supportive of it. He said, "I'll certainly support you on it." His senior staff had to vote on it, but if you had a director or chiefs that would approve it, it was more likely to win the support of the center director. Aaron Cohen was running the show, but he had to work with his managers. I don't know. We were more of a team—everything came together. I used to travel, too, to different events. He'd bring me along as just a part of the team. I got to travel quite a bit back then, too.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That must have been difficult with two young daughters.

COX: Yes. Well, they were getting older at that point. Actually, let's see. I remarried in 1980. I met my second husband at Johnson Space Center, too, but it was a little different situation. I was going to another church. We used to have a church called Uniting Church on El Camino [Real] there in Clear Lake. They had the Montessori school there, and then there was a Jewish tabernacle next to it. We were having Easter sunrise service, and these friends of mine—Louis McFadin worked at NASA, and he worked with Robert [Doughty], my second husband. He was matchmaking, kind of. He said, "Why don't you come to Easter sunrise service, Bob?" He says, "Why would I come to Easter sunrise service? I don't even want to get up that early." He said, "Well, our pastor has a different attitude. He says, "It's sunrise somewhere, so we have it at nine o'clock."

So he came, and we were out on the hill behind the church there. Had our blankets, and he was doing the sermon outside. My friends had a blanket, and they had four kids, and then me and my two kids were sitting on a blanket. Bob walked up, and there wasn't any place for him to sit. He says, "Where am I going to sit, Lou?" He says, "Well, ask around. Somebody will give you a seat." And I said, "Would you like to share my blanket?" That's where I met Bob. We got married a year later. He was completely different from my first husband, so he was there to help me take care of the girls when I was out on travel. My youngest was 12 years old when I married him. We'll be married 44 years this year in August.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Congratulations.

COX: Thank you. He's a keeper.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It sounds like it.

COX: He had the same problem I did. I don't know if you want to get into this. The thing about getting my degree was that I could become a professional, you know, be a specialist. I had always wanted to graduate from college and NASA gave me the chance. He was a GS-12. He was an electronics technician when they first hired him, but things were moving on. He was actually working in the Computer Section at this point. He told his boss, "How come I can't get promoted?" He says, "Well, if you had a degree, I could promote you." He'd actually been working on his degree, too, at U of H [University of Houston], and he was only about 20 hours away from graduating, so he went back to school because I encouraged him. I said, "You're only 20 hours away from getting your degree." So we graduated the same year from college at U of H. He was an 11, and they promoted him to a 12, and then he got a 13. It worked out for him.

I don't know who made that rule up. Personnel would tell you, "You can't get promoted unless you have a degree, or you can't be a specialist, or an engineer, or whatever." But there were people that did. It all depends on who you knew and who you were talking to. But I'm glad I got my degree. It was interesting.

Back then, I can't remember the professor out there at U of H, but he was real involved with NASA, too, in doing things. He put together a master's degree in business administration for just NASA employees. We pretty much set our schedule. We had to go to classes, but a lot of us were traveling, and so if we couldn't make it, they would make accommodations for us. So I got my master's degree in 1988 from U of H. Somebody said, "Aren't you going for your doctorate?"

I said, "I want to stay married." The master's didn't even help me. It wasn't going to get me promoted. I just said, "I've had enough. I'm happy.'

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, going to school, it's very time consuming.

COX: Yes, yes. It took Estella a long time to get through her PhD. It was out on the East Coast, so she'd have to go back there and do things there, and then fly back and forth.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Going to school at U of H or somewhere nearby is a little different than going to George Washington [University, Washington, DC].

COX: Yes. Going out to the campus, I met with—who's the gentleman out there who's doing the archives?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Matthew Peek.

COX: Matthew, yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: So you're donating your records?

COX: Yes. I've already gone out there, and we've talked. He's supposed to get back with me on signing off on something. None of my kids are going to want them. I didn't have that much.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I think it's great to have them there, because then if they are interested, they will be someplace safe and accessible, and if you want to go view them or see them for some reason, you can. But then it opens it up to a world of researchers.

COX: Yes. I had some issues with some of the ways they did things at NASA, but I'm very grateful to NASA for helping me get my education. I think the only course we couldn't get through was philosophy. I had to pay for philosophy. I don't know why I had to take philosophy in the first place. Stan Goldstein was the training manager over in Human Resources, and he always signed off on them. As long as you can justify how it relates to your job, we'll pay for it. Just had to go to my philosophy class during my off time. I think it was worth it, and I made sure both my daughters got through college. I said, "I don't care what you do. Get your college degree first."

ROSS-NAZZAL: It is important. It really is, especially nowadays. If you don't have a degree, you're really not going places. It used to be, you could have a high school diploma and get a job, but not so much anymore.

COX: Yes. It's sad, in a way, because there's a lot of smart people out there, but you have to have a degree. As I told my daughters, it's just a piece of paper, but it opens doors.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It definitely checks the box. Before we talked about you moving up to being a specialist, I wanted to ask a couple of questions. I'm interested in the female experience working at JSC. One of the women engineers told me that the secretaries that she worked with—she worked in Engineering—were her supporters, her cheerleaders at the time, and she felt like she was their

cheerleader, as well. They were support for each other. She felt like the guys didn't really seem to get it, that the women weren't as important, and the work that they did wasn't all that important, either. I'm wondering what you thought. What was your perspective in terms of people you worked with in Flight Operations or elsewhere across the center?

COX: Well, looking back, I worked in Building 30, and I used to take copies into the Mission Control Center, because that's where most of the people I worked with were during missions. There weren't that many women. I would have supported any women, but all of us were secretaries that I interacted with. We may have had a couple of office managers that were women, but there were no flight controllers back then that were women. I worked there, and then I went over to the directorate office. I didn't interact with any women managers there, because as I said, they were all men. Most of the offices I can think of—Center Operations, it's where they buy the furniture and stuff, there were a couple women in there. Yes, that's about all the interaction I had with women in professional positions at that time.

ROSS-NAZZAL: We interviewed "Poppy" [Frances] Northcutt, and she said she never ran into any women, ever. She was working trajectories over in Mission Control. Did you work with any of the secretaries? Did you view them as a mentor?

COX: Yes, Connie Critzos was a mentor. I appreciated it in some ways, but I felt like I wasn't learning. I was just making sure I did what she wanted done. But I did have one over in the branch office. I'm trying to remember her name now. I want to say Connie, but it wasn't Connie. She was an older secretary. She was up in her 50s.

I didn't have very good attendance when I first went to work at JSC. One thing was, I had kids. If they were sick, I couldn't make it in. Sometimes I just didn't go in, because I didn't feel like it. She gave me a talking to. She says, "If you don't show up, they will replace you. So you need to be here if you really want this job." I took her seriously. I said, "I'll do better," because I was calling in about every other week and not showing up. We had happy hours, so I sometimes didn't feel like coming in the next day. This was in my younger years. I don't drink at all anymore. It was one of those things. We'd go to lunch, and then we wouldn't come back. It was a learning process. I did take her seriously. "You need to be here, or you may not be here much longer," or something like that. I think I was still temporary then. I did get permanent status after about two or three years.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When you first got here, you mentioned that there was a dress code early on. What was the dress code? Was there also a dress code for men, or was this primarily for women?

COX: It was primarily for women. Men usually wore a suit and tie, or at least a tie with the pants, slacks. Nobody wore blue jeans back then. It was a different era. The women were supposed to wear dresses. They didn't require you to wear them a certain length. A lot of them had pretty short skirts on. I never did like to wear a dress. In high school, I couldn't wear pants to school, either, because that was back in the '60s and '50s. Girls wore dresses all the time. It was pretty cold in Arkansas to wear a dress all year long. It's one of those things. I don't think that it was official, but you knew you weren't supposed to wear pants. I don't think they would have sent you home if you'd worn pants, but it was frowned upon. You might not get that next promotion.

ROSS-NAZZAL: When did that start to change? Do you remember?

COX: In the ’70s. We had the Equal Rights Act. Ginny Hughes was the one that was doing a lot of programs, like Women’s History Month. Part of that was why do we have to wear dresses every day to work? We should be able to wear pants. This is the ’70s. Back in, I think it was ’77; I guess it was the International Year of the Women, 1977. It met in Houston. They let us go down to the convention down there, and that was great. You got to meet a lot of very exciting people. It was just a good transitioning.

I’m pretty sure I didn’t have to wear a dress too long at JSC, because it changed. I forget what year. It used to be Manned Spacecraft Center, you know, when I first went to work there, but they changed the name, too, because President [Lyndon B.] Johnson passed away, and they renamed it after him. There was a lot of changes going on.

Of course, we had the selection of minorities and women astronauts in 1978, and that was really exciting. I was so happy to see them finally select women. If you don’t see somebody in a role, you don’t think you can be one. That was the thing. Up until then, just pilots could be astronauts. That was the problem. We brought several women to the center. They tried out to be astronauts, but because they didn’t have the number of flight hours, they couldn’t become astronauts when they were first selecting them. They were just as tough as the men astronauts. They went through all the tests. It was an interesting time. I really learned a lot. NASA was very helpful to me becoming who I have become, so much more confident in myself, and I have a better outlook on life.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you think that what you experienced at NASA fed your ideas about equality, or do you think that you changed NASA and made it more aware of issues about equality, or somewhere in between?

COX: Yes, I think it's somewhere in between. I don't know that I changed their attitudes, but I became a role model; you can progress and not be just in one position or doing one thing all the time. It was an interesting time, because number one, I wasn't married anymore, so I had to do something. I wanted to go to work and be responsible. I think it changed my perspective. Things were changing at NASA, too, so it was a good time for me to be there and be in that change that was happening. It was a blend.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned that the International Year of Women and NASA going there. Did NASA play a role at all in that conversation, or you just got to attend?

COX: We provided some clerical support. I worked at some of the stations. They had a lot of women coming into town, but NASA really wasn't involved. It was sponsored by the government. I'm not sure if it was Office of Personnel Management.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That was the Civil Service Commission at that point?

COX: Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Okay.

COX: They were allowing you, at the centers or the federal government agencies, to support the conference. There were a lot of outside people that I'd never met before. Bella [S.] Abzug was there, and people like that. It was really exciting to get to see all those people and go to downtown Houston, too. That used to be a big deal. Now I don't want to go to downtown Houston. Johnson specifically wasn't too happy about us going down there, because it took us away from work. If you're not on the job, then you're not doing your job. But it was sanctioned by the government. I forget who put it on. I think it was probably a government-wide effort that pulled it all together.

I think I gave Matthew that book. It told about all the women in the workforce, and how things were changing, and different things like that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: At NASA?

COX: No. It was put on by the International Women's Year. It was a big write up. And things were changing. There was a lot of things that you could do that you couldn't do before. We were all really excited to be part of it. That was a good experience.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's great that you can participate in those kinds of events. I was curious about any training that you might have participated in as a clerk, or a typist, or a stenographer, if you went to any classes. I know I've seen in the *Roundup* where they did a lot of training for secretaries.

COX: Yes. It was more motivational, I think. I'm not sure exactly. I went to some of them. I can't really remember too much about them at this point. I've been to a lot of training. We were trying to overcome people's bias toward disabled people, and we had a trainer one time. I can't remember if that was at—I think it was at Johnson. That wasn't in the secretarial field. I was working in my professional capacity at that point. They didn't train us to type better. It wasn't exactly job related. It was more just feeling good about yourself, and that you were important. Doing roleplaying; you had a right to speak up if you didn't like what somebody was doing, and that just because somebody wanted it, you didn't have to agree. You could negotiate. You could get things. It did teach me quite a few things, I guess, looking back. And it got me out of work. They did a lot of training at NASA back in the '60s and '70s—I guess they still do. Some of them were probably not very productive, but you got to go to training class.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned that there would be activities where you'd go out for lunch and you wouldn't feel like coming in the next day. You came just as we were wrapping up Apollo. I wonder what your experience was working with such a young group of people and how it impacted what you saw going on at the center.

COX: I never thought about it that way. I guess I was 27 when I went to work at NASA. I got divorced when I was 27. It was fun to interact with them. They were doing things, and it was a younger group of people. There weren't a lot of old people at NASA at that point. They were all young. It was more just socializing. I can't think of anything that comes to mind.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What sort of socializing would you do?

COX: That was one thing. I don't know if it was Ginny Hughes that put it together or not. The women at the center had—it was called American Business Women's Association, ABWA. I remember because I now belong to AAUW [American Association of University Women]. We would meet, have dinners, get together, and maybe have a motivational speaker. It was women in business. Looking back on it, it was sort of commercialized, but it got women together and talking to each other. Most of the women that went there were from NASA, because that was the pool they drew from, so I got to meet some women that I normally wouldn't have met at work. We worked in different buildings, and I rarely saw anybody in another building, unless I had to go over there and do something. It just was not done. You usually stayed in your building all day and went out for lunch, and that was it. So unless you ran into somebody at lunch, you didn't have much chance to socialize. They were real helpful in giving us hints on things to do to be a better employee. I don't even know if they're in business anymore.

After I left Johnson, I got out to Dryden, and one of the first women I met, she's one of my oldest friends now, Linda Quinby, talked me into joining the American Association of University Women. The only thing I don't like about them is you have to be graduated from university to be a member. But they've done a lot, and they have all kinds of opportunity. Out in California, in the summertime, we interview girls that are in between the 10th and 11th grade, or maybe 9th and 10th, to go to a summer camp to learn more about becoming an engineer or becoming a technical person. Tech Trek, that's what it's called. What's the astronaut, the one that lives in San Diego. Is she still there? Sally [K.] Ride?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, she passed away.

COX: She did. She would come and speak, because she was in San Diego. They had them all up and down California at different colleges. They're still doing it. I don't know if they've ever done any research into if it is impacting people going into science and engineering.

That's one of Linda's problems. When she first went to work for NASA, she was an intern or co-op. She was working out at Dryden, and one of the engineers basically said, "If you want to get a job at NASA, you probably ought to get into another field. You're never going to be hired as an engineer." It was a good old boys' club back then. She was a technical writer. She worked at NASA, but she wasn't an engineer. She's probably smarter than some of the engineers here. I always enjoyed my friendship with her. We're still friends. I went to see her two summers ago in San Diego. She and her husband live in Carlsbad.

That's the only bad part about my job. My job, after I got to be a specialist, I was in charge of discrimination complaints, and nobody likes you. The employee doesn't like you and management doesn't want you to do anything.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Talk about your role in discrimination complaints.

COX: You do your best because you can't prove discrimination unless somebody actually says, "I discriminated against you." They've got to write it up that way. Unless you've got an eyewitness besides yourself that heard somebody say something, you're never going to prove your complaint. I guess they still have it in place, but I don't think people even file a complaint anymore, because they don't think they're going to get anywhere.

The one case that I did have that was discrimination, and I was so happy that the attorneys agreed with me, he just said he didn't want to file a complaint. They gave him a waiver. He was a pilot, and at 65, you couldn't fly alone. He was an instructor, so he had to fly in a plane with another employee. He was teaching another pilot, but that student wasn't a pilot yet. They weren't going to let him teach anymore. He filed a complaint, because they wouldn't let him fly without another pilot in the plane. So they gave him a waiver, and that was the end of that.

I wish there was some other way to resolve issues than filing a complaint, because the employee always suffers. Another female employee was threatened, and she didn't have a witness. They weren't going to do anything to the other employee. They would move her somewhere else.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That feeds into another question that I had about, in the '70s, did you notice any instances or cases of sexual discrimination or harassment? Did you encounter that yourself?

COX: I didn't really encounter any. That's the problem. People don't want to bring a complaint, because they know they'll be ostracized. We did a lot of sexual harassment training, and everybody had to go to sexual harassment training, but the guys were insulted. They didn't sexually harass anybody. Why should they have to go?

We did diversity training. I don't know if you've read anything about the diversity training we did. I think all the centers were supposed to teach all their employees this diversity training. It was really good training, and we had these contractors that taught the first classes, and then they taught the EEO officer. We partnered with Personnel or somebody to do it, so it would be coming from the people that work there. It was about accepting everybody. I don't remember all the things we did, but this was a week-long training. This was out at Dryden, but I know they were doing it

at all the other centers. It kind of diluted the EEO program, and so I guess we're now the diversity program. I don't know what they call it now. Do they still call it EEO?

ROSS-NAZZAL: I don't think so.

COX: I think it's diversity manager.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That makes more sense, because now the focus is on diversity, equity, inclusion, and opportunity. I think that's what it is.

COX: Opportunity's still there a little bit.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Or maybe it's accessibility. Maybe that's it. I think it's DEIA. Yes, so it must be accessibility.

COX: I supported it. I didn't have any problem with it. I was pretty close to retirement anyway, and I was thinking, "I don't think we're going to be in the same world we were when I first started," which is probably true of everything. We hopefully get better.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I was going to say, isn't that the goal, to put yourself out of business?

COX: Yes. Oh, yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: People are more aware of the fact that people need to be treated equally, no matter their race, sex, gender, disabled status.

COX: Yes. It's difficult. It's hard for some people to get around that. Overall, I thought NASA was very progressive in that. But yes, there were still a few places where it was worse than others. Hopefully, we got the message out.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Do you think it was NASA that was progressive, or do you think it was the federal government in general that was leading the charge, and NASA was following?

COX: I really think NASA was probably better than a lot of the other federal agencies. I don't really have any evidence of that, but it just seemed like, well, because we're in the space program. Hiring the minority astronauts and women astronauts was a big step forward, to show that they accepted everybody in all areas. Of course, Shirley Price was always unhappy they didn't hire a disabled astronaut, but I don't know if that's possible. There's safety issues there. I think they're much more open in their hiring than they used to be. I'm not sure of the other federal agencies. I don't even know if we still have an affirmative action plan. That's gone away. They never did meet their goals, anyway, so I'm not sure. It was so frustrating, because you'd say, "Well, we're going to recruit. We're going to bring in all these people." And they never got hired. Why say we were going to do it if we can't do it?

ROSS-NAZZAL: That must have been very frustrating.

COX: Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You did mention the first Shuttle class, which included women and minorities. I was wondering, did you play any role in that effort? Joe [Atkinson] was on the selection board.

COX: Yes, well, on a really small level. I think I was still working as a secretary at that point. We tried to get minority recruiters to go out and recruit from NASA. I think they helped. It was an exciting time. I was so happy they selected some. It was one of those things where—it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. I was glad we were able to be in on that. We didn't really get to know them very well, but they would come in the office and meet with Joe Atkinson, so they seemed like a lot of nice candidates that they had. I'm glad that they were doing it. It was time. I hope we finally get somebody back up to the Moon.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That is a big push.

COX: Yes, it's been a long time.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You had mentioned those affirmative action plans that were drawn up and that you weren't really able to meet those numbers. Would you talk about drawing up those plans, and why it was important for NASA to think about including more women and minorities in its hiring, and how EEO envisioned these changes?

COX: The problem is, and I guess, looking back, the goal should have been that the whole center should have come up with a plan instead of just our office, because they didn't want to accept it. We would get it approved by the center director, but then they didn't buy into meeting those goals. Instead of saying, "Can you hire three Blacks this year," we just said, "You've got to hire a certain percentage," and the percentage was never met. It was like they might hire one out of a goal of four, or something like that, or they might not hire anybody, because they can't find them. There were plenty of applications.

The co-op program was a really good vehicle for minorities and women to get into NASA. I think they got a lot of people that way, because they were in college, and they'd come and work at the center for, I think it was two summers. They got a chance to see how they worked, and then if they liked them, they would make them an offer when they graduated. I think that was one of the best programs. I don't know if they're still doing that or not. Then you could go out and recruit at universities and find them, and, hopefully, it would work out.

Like I said, they didn't own the program. It was the EEO Office's program, and "we have to do this." I'm not smart enough to figure out how we could have done it differently, but it just seemed like we weren't involving the people up front. "How many do you think you could hire this year? What would you suggest?" It was handed down from [NASA] Headquarters [Washington, DC]. We were told to come up with a certain goal, and all the centers were supposed to meet those goals. Of course, then, if we didn't meet our goal, then the EEO Office got blamed for not meeting that goal. We were the vehicle at the center that was supposed to make it happen. It was just almost impossible to do.

I don't know how many directorates we had, probably 5 or 10 something like that, and a lot of them were not in areas of science and engineering, like the Center Operations. They would

hire more women and minorities than some of the technical places. It was just a very frustrating job, having this goal. Joe Atkinson was the one responsible for that. Of course, the center directors signed off on it, too, so it was his responsibility, but he was depending on our office to come up with meeting the goal. I don't think we ever met the goal we set. We might do good one year, because they would have a really good year, but it was frustrating.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were they telling you, "We just can't find women and minorities in these fields?" Did you get a sense of why they weren't meeting these goals?

COX: It wasn't that they didn't want to meet them, but I don't know. We'd have candidates. They wouldn't select them. I don't know why they didn't select them.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Fair enough. I was just curious if you had a sense about why that was the case. In the '70s, Congress was monitoring NASA and its hires, because it wasn't hiring enough women and minorities, and they wanted to make sure NASA was meeting a target, because even in fields where there would be women, like you mentioned in Center Operations, they weren't necessarily hiring women. I was just curious about that. Did you have programs to increase the number of candidates that engineering or science would see at the center? Were there programs like that?

COX: Yes. There were several people from our office. Jose Perez, for example. He would go to minority Hispanic schools or those that had a large Hispanic minority, like out in New Mexico and recruit and bring back applications. Personnel would send them out to the managers, and they

wouldn't hire anybody. Chuck [M.] Hoskins, also, he was a Black man that was working in our office at the time.

ROSS-NAZZAL: How did you become a specialist? You moved from being a secretary to a professional. How did that happen?

COX: I got my degree in 1982, and I was promoted to a GS-7 specialist that year. I'm pretty sure Jim Gorman was retiring. I wouldn't swear to that, but he was leaving anyway. I got trained by him on discrimination complaints. I took over that job when he left. Then I got a promotion to a 9, and then 11. It was pretty quick, in a way, because I got it in '82. Then when I got to the 11 level—I guess for lack of a better word, it was very political. I wasn't going to get the EEO officer job when Dr. Atkinson went away. Probably wouldn't be deputy. We did have a vacancy in the deputy office, and the highest rank I could go to would be a 12. If I stayed, I could probably get promoted to a 12. So I just saw the handwriting on the wall.

I actually went on a lot of trips with the EEO officers and meeting the other center EEO officers and different people. About that time—I forget when she came into the picture—but Gloria Hall was the EEO officer at Ames Research Center [Moffett Field, California], and she was very—how shall we say it—progressive. She wasn't well liked, but she got people hired. She said, "You're going to do this." Sometimes she won. We got to talking, and she said, "I've got a vacancy at Dryden," because at that time, Dryden was part of Ames Research Center. Never have figured that one out. It wasn't a center; it was a facility.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Like White Sands [Test Facility, New Mexico] for JSC?

COX: Yes, White Sands. I never figured that one out, either, because they're nowhere close to each other. Proximity, I guess. She said, "I got a vacancy there if you're interested." I was thinking, "Well, my husband's mother lived in San Diego, and he was born in California. He had always wanted to get back to California." So I said, "Well, let me talk to my husband and see if he's open to it." He said, "Yes, let's go." I gave my notice in '89 and moved out to Dryden Flight Research Facility. They only have a thousand employees.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's tiny, yes, especially compared to JSC.

COX: Yes. It's like a little small town, and everybody knows everybody. I wasn't exactly well accepted. They brought me in as the EEO specialist, because—well, I was the only EEO person there. I had a staff of me.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Just you?

COX: Yes. I had no secretary. I had to go to the director's office to get anything done. Luckily, I used to be a secretary, so I could type all my stuff up. They had computers then. I was sitting back at the back of the building, about a mile away from the director's office. I sat there —I had no authority at all. I did go to senior staff meetings. I was invited to senior staff meetings, but that was because I was on the senior staff. I guess I was technically the EEO officer.

I think it was about three years before Dryden became its own center. They had been pushing NASA for a long time, because you had to get on a flight in the morning. We flew out of

Lancaster and flew up to Ames to go to meetings up there, because we were part of Ames. Gloria was my boss up there. I had to go up and see her every now and then. Then you fly back in the evening; it was about an hour flight. It was a short flight. It's hard to be part of a center if you're not even located in the same town.

I lucked out there, and I did get promoted to GS-13. Then I just kept pushing, and I retired as a GS-15. I then had a staff of—let's see—myself, and a secretary, and two other people. That's four, and then I had a—she wasn't a contractor. She was working for a college, an HBCU [historically black colleges and universities], and she worked at the office to work for HBCUs, so she was part of the staff. I had five people total in my office then so I moved up.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You sure did.

COX: Yes. Everybody was really nice. In some ways I enjoyed working there. My goal was always to retire from there and move down to San Diego. My mother-in-law convinced us to buy a condo down there when we first moved out, so we could afford to live in San Diego, because it is expensive to live down there. So when we retired, we moved to San Diego. I retired in 2003. I had 30 years in. I just got tired of the—I don't know—on some level, I was accepted, but I wasn't listened to, that type of thing.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Was it because you came from JSC, or was it because you were in charge of EEO, or was there another reason?

COX: I was in charge of EEO. It wouldn't have mattered what color I was, or sex, I think. It was a position they had to have, so I was it. I couldn't get any funding. I'd go back to Headquarters sometimes saying, "They're not giving me funds here to do my job," and the director in Washington would call them, and call the center director. And of course, that wasn't a good thing to do, either. I didn't do that very often. You had to do something to get some recognition. We were hosting EEO Councils there. We were a center. I should have recognition. I don't know if Dr. Atkinson ever got an SES [senior executive service]. I'm not sure. That's the next level. I didn't see myself ever getting SES there, so I decided it was time to enjoy my life.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were there any initiatives that you were able to sponsor out of Dryden? You said that you weren't getting a lot of support, but was there anything that you were really hoping to achieve—maybe some goals or objectives when you first went out there?

COX: Well, we had the affirmative action plan, too, but it was the same there as it was in any other center. Then, like I said, we started moving towards diversity, and I did teach the diversity training. We did get a child development center, which was closed down. It just seemed like I was tolerated but not respected. People like me. I'm a very likeable person. That's the thing, I'm not sure I was the right person for the job to get the job done, but I was selected. I made a lot of good friends there, and I think I grew. It was a growing experience, moving to another new place and starting all over again. I just felt like it was something I wanted to do.

I was at Johnson 17 years and Dryden for 13 years, so I did my 13 years in the desert. That's not very complimentary, but it was a tough place to live. We went through two windshields, because driving into the desert, the sand was hitting your windshield when the wind was blowing.

The windshield would just get pitted. You had to be able to see where you were going. There were a lot of nice people there, and I enjoyed working with the people there. I was glad I moved there, so it was really a good experience for me.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It's such a difference between Johnson Space Center and Dryden, especially the size. Were there other differences that you noticed, especially related to what you were working on? You mentioned the affirmative action plan really wasn't going anywhere, at either location, but were there similarities or differences in any other ways that you noticed?

COX: Well, that's a good question. Like I said, it was easier to get in touch with people. Everybody knew you. I could walk into anybody's office. At Johnson, you were so remote from different offices that you just didn't get to know people. I had a good relationship with the personnel officer Dora Borjon. She understood the problem, too, getting people hired. She would try to work with me, but it was a challenge, because she was also reporting to the center director. If the manager didn't agree with something, they usually took the manager's side and not her side or my side. That's the thing. It was a different world, but it was the same NASA protocols; you couldn't do something without the director signing off on it, and sometimes he wasn't in the mood to do it. You kept hoping it was going to be a good day.

ROSS-NAZZAL: There was some legislation that was passed that I wondered if people were more on board with, and that was the Americans with Disabilities Act.

COX: That was probably worse.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Oh, really?

COX: Well, for one thing, it's like with the astronauts. For their jobs you think only an able-bodied person could do this. Yes, we had a lot of people working out on the flight line, doing real jobs, working on machinery, fixing planes, because they flew the planes there. NASA stands for National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Aeronautics is what they did. They were a very nice group. Their mechanics were listened to, but there were no women mechanics. I don't know if any women wanted to be mechanics, but it was one of those things where the chances of getting—in some fields, you wouldn't have a pool that you could draw from. I don't think that we even tried that much.

I got to know a lot of people much closer there. It was a small environment. You wanted to stay on everybody's good side there. It was just a different atmosphere there. We were always having some sort of picnics and get-togethers, because there was fewer of us. You could do stuff like that. It included everybody, so that was good. One of our big challenges there was, we had an engineer, but he had developed Tourette's syndrome after he was hired. Are you familiar with that?

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, you just speak out and say obscene or inappropriate things.

COX: He'd also hit his head against the wall and do really crazy things. So nobody wanted to work with him. I said, "You can't discriminate against him. You hired him." They finally got a woman branch manager—that was another good friend of mine—who said, "I'll take him on. Give

him a task, and I'll get him to do it," because he couldn't finish a task. That was what they were saying. They would give him a job to do, and he couldn't finish the work. But he was a GS-12 or 13. I said, "We ought to get an award for hiring a disabled person," but they didn't look at it that way. She was successful in giving him performance appraisals, because nobody else wanted to work with him; he was difficult to work with, but they finally talked him into taking early retirement. He was up in his 50s, but he didn't really want to retire. It's just one of those things where they kept saying, "Don't you want to retire?" So he took an early retirement.

We didn't really have—I was trying to think—probably at either center many disabled employees, except for Shirley. The other disabled person was Connie Alexander, but I think she was a contractor. She was a psychologist, and she was working there, and she went blind. She was able to function, and she had a seeing-eye dog. I also traveled with her some, because she needed a travel companion, too. I'd go on trips with her. Got to know her real well. She still put on makeup and did everything. Just a very motivating person. She went blind after she was an adult. We went to a conference one time. I was supposed to be keeping up with her, and she went to one class, and I went to another one. I went down to the other class to make sure she was okay, and she wasn't there. I went up to the front of the room, and there was a lady up there, and I said, "Have you seen a blind lady with a seeing-eye dog?" She says, "What kind of dog was it?" I said, "How many people have you seen today with a dog?"

ROSS-NAZZAL: Right, with seeing-eye dogs.

COX: But she said, "No, I haven't seen anybody." She was just kidding me. I got to know Connie real well. She was in ABWA, too. She was a real role model for me, too. There were so few

people, I don't think that hiring disabled employees was a real big priority for NASA. They just ignored it. It happened probably after I left, because I think that was a little bit later than some of the other acts. We did this training one time, and the trainer there was talking about that we're all TABs, temporarily able-bodied. He says, "Some people are SABs, S-A-B, severely able-bodied." But, you know, it can happen to anyone. He was trying to say you could be disabled tomorrow, to get you to accept working with disabled people.

I really took that to heart, because I think of Shirley. She could do as much as I could. She was probably a lot smarter than I was. She actually went on to get her PhD, I think. I know she doesn't work for NASA anymore. She's a very smart woman. And they did hire her. I give them credit for that. She ended up working in our office. I enjoyed getting to know her. She was really a nice lady.

Let's see. I got off the subject. What were we talking about originally?

ROSS-NAZZAL: We were just talking about the ADA. Out at Dryden, were you going out to the HBCUs and working with other schools like that?

COX: Yes, that was one of my big successes there, actually. We got a lot of HBCU grants for different schools. I don't know if you've ever even heard of it, but there's a Las Vegas, New Mexico, [New Mexico Highlands University] and they have an HBCU there.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I didn't know that.

COX: Yes. Well, it was a minority college. We did a lot of trips. There would be projects that they were going to do for NASA, so they got grants for doing it. I was successful at getting a lot of the HBCUs contracts for different things that they needed researched. They would come to the center and present their findings. They were open to things like that. Headquarters was funding the grants, so it was in their favor to find an HBCU that could do the research that they wanted, because they didn't have to pay for it. It came out of the HBCU budget. It was a win-win, I guess, in some ways. That was one. We had several schools we worked with, not just the one in New Mexico. They're all over the country. There's another one here in Texas, Prairie View A&M.

It's different than hiring. It's more just a cooperative effort. The thing is that they don't work with them on a daily basis. I guess it helps some minorities on some level. I think that it was a good program. I think it's still in effect. I was looking for something that Dryden would do, and they were accepting of that. We had some co-ops that came in and worked at the center in the summertime from those schools.

We didn't have as many minorities working at the center as Johnson would, but there were less opportunities at Dryden. Usually our minorities were Hispanic. We had one senior engineer there. I don't know why he stayed, because everyone ignored him. He was a very smart man. He got his doctorate after he went to work at Dryden. He was a mathematician. He invented something. He was the first one to come up with the idea. And they just said, "Oh, someone would have done that sooner or later." He was ostracized. I think it was because he was Black. If one of the other engineers had come up with it, they would have said, "Oh, he's brilliant." They just didn't respect him. He never did fit in at Dryden, but he stayed there. He was still there when I left. He was a 15, but he was never going to be a supervisor.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's a challenge. Could you speak up for those people as head of EEO?

COX: I tried, but it was more, "Well, he has a job. He's doing what he wants to do." He was doing some sort of research. Maybe I just didn't understand why he worked all by himself. He had a separate office, and he was right down from the director's office. I don't know that he ever gave a presentation. It seems like a waste of time and money, really. He was closely watched by Headquarters, because they liked him. He came on as a co-op there, and they hired him, and he'd been there forever. It seemed like a strange relationship.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You mentioned Headquarters and the EEO Council. You were a member of the EEO Council?

COX: Yes.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Were they sponsoring initiatives that you were working on out at Dryden and Johnson?

COX: The EEO Council met twice a year. We went to different centers every time. They would be in Huntsville [Marshall Space Flight Center, Alabama] and Kennedy [Space Center, Florida]. The deputy director and the EEO officer had to be there, and then we had different other people come in from different centers. Each center would host the EEO Council meeting, and they would talk about projects that they were working on, like the affirmative action plan. They looked at things like that, and how people were doing on their EEO plan. The center director wasn't required

to come. It was the deputy center director. He's supposed to represent the center, but sometimes you wonder why the center director can't come to it. That's the way they had agreed to have it. It was mostly a week of meetings and not much happened. There was lots of talking and discussion, but I don't know that a lot of stuff was decided at those Council meetings. It was just to get together, compare notes with the other centers.

ROSS-NAZZAL: One of the things that I was curious about is how things changed over the years. You started in the EEO in the late '70s, and you retired from EEO. Did you notice a change in EEO or how NASA handled things, discrimination, sexual harassment, racial equality, those sorts of issues? Was there a change that you noticed?

COX: I think there was improvement from the early '70s. I didn't actually get into EEO, let's say, till '76 or something like that. I was in Flight Operations. There was more awareness brought to it, and there were attempts at trying to be more equitable. The first Space Shuttle astronaut selection happened during my term, and I think that was a big step forward.

I didn't mention. One of the things we had at each of the centers were EEO counselors, who were actual employees that we'd send to a training class to learn about how to talk to someone who has a complaint. They're the first line. If they can resolve the complaint without it going formal, then that's what they try to do. They can have authority to go to the supervisor and talk to them. At that point, the other person is not filing a complaint. They're just unhappy with something, so they try to resolve it without having to file a complaint. That worked in some cases. We had a lot of people that would talk to the counselors. We tried to have some diversity in the counselors, some women, some men, some minorities. They would resolve them. I think in some

ways, that was a good system, because once it got into somebody coming into my office saying, "I'm filing a complaint," then we had a process we had to go to, and the lines were drawn at that point. I think that helped resolve a lot of the complaints over the years. Now, I'm not sure if people just got tired of not being heard and thought they couldn't file a complaint, but it was an avenue that I thought helped as much as anything, because once it got into a formal complaint, the managers didn't want to admit they'd done anything wrong. Unfortunately, the person that brought the complaint was ostracized. We'd try to keep them anonymous as long as we could. That was one good thing.

I still think the diversity training made me see that we're all people. We all are different. You and I have different issues, but you have to accept different people and work with them. Just because you grew up in the South and I grew up in the North, doesn't mean we can't get along. I did like the diversity training. I liked the approach they took, and hopefully that has helped resolve a lot of issues that we used to have in the '60s and '70s, like not accepting other people just because they were different from you. I know it's still a challenge for some people. But during my career, I think we made progress.

It's a different world these days, too. Everybody's doing different things now. We don't have to make coffee anymore. I think women have gotten equal rights. I really do. I think a lot of the issues that I had back then—I was always going to be a secretary. I wasn't always a secretary, so I felt like that has improved my situation. I don't know if I would have been able to do it if I'd been working in Arkansas in an office there, because I would have never gotten promoted or become anything else but just a typist and stenographer. NASA helped me in upward mobility. I'm a poster child for Upward Mobility. I'll say that.

ROSS-NAZZAL: An EEO child, for sure.

COX: Yes, right.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I did want to ask you, and you don't have to give an example, but I was just thinking, what's the process when somebody wanted to file a complaint? How did that unfold, and what was your role as that process unfolded?

COX: It became legal then, so I had to work with the Legal Office. When you get tied up in Legal, they just complicate things tremendously. We would try to go to the manager—let's say it was a sexual harassment complaint—and try to resolve it. We'd come up with some options. They usually wouldn't like them. Then we'd have to try to see if we could compromise. If we couldn't do that, then it went to Headquarters, and Headquarters would open a case. That could take anywhere from a year to two to resolve. It never was resolved in the complainant's favor. Usually more lawyers would get involved up there, because they never wanted to find a case of discrimination; that is my opinion.

It was very difficult to get a good resolution for the person that was filing the complaint. They set up a system, but it was not a way to resolve something. There were no winners in it. Management was forced to make decisions they didn't want to make, but they made them just to get the case to go away. The person making the complaint wanted a different resolution, and they were forced to accept something that they didn't want to accept. They were already ostracized. It was, in some ways, not a good system. I don't know what the answer to that is, but it just didn't resolve anything.

ROSS-NAZZAL: You never worked with anyone who said, "Thanks, that resolved the issue."

COX: No. They weren't really happy, because the thing they wanted was someone to say, "I'm sorry I did that to you," and they weren't going to say that, because they can't admit it, because then it is discrimination. It's a no-win situation. Unless you have a witness, you can't prove discrimination, and even sometimes if you have a witness it did not matter. It was a frustrating job.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's what I was just going to ask you. It seems like a very stressful situation with little support, and also your hands are tied behind your back.

COX: Right. Yes, it really was. It gave me an opportunity to move up, but on some levels, I wasn't helping the people I wanted to help. When I went out to Dryden, I delegated that duty to somebody else in the office. He was a disabled person. He was on crutches. He was very forceful in discrimination complaints, trying to get something resolved. Even he was frustrated, because management just wouldn't work with you. They'd work with you, but they didn't want to do what you wanted them to do, and that was a reasonable solution that would be helpful to the employee. It was just the same at Dryden as it was at Johnson. I could delegate it at Dryden. I used to work with the attorneys, and it was just frustrating, because you can never admit discrimination, because then they did something wrong. That's why I never wanted to be an attorney. I just couldn't see how they could do that, but they did.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What do you think was your biggest challenge while working at NASA? Was that it, just the fact that you couldn't help people resolve these issues?

COX: The way the system was set up, it was an unwinnable situation for anybody, especially for me, because I was at one point, in charge of the office. If I couldn't get it done, then it seemed like I wasn't solving anything. I wanted to be a change agent. I didn't want to be somebody that just did my job and collected my paycheck. I complained about not having the money, but it wasn't the money. It was just getting things done that would make everything work. That's the reason I really identified with the diversity issue. We all need to be aware of people's diversity, and we shouldn't be having to be told by somebody in an office that you've got to do this. But changing people is tough, I know.

ROSS-NAZZAL: It is definitely tough. What do you think was your greatest contribution? You mentioned the childcare center. Are there others?

COX: Yes, I was happy with the childcare. I really think it made them aware. At Johnson, they did address the problem. I was really lucky to have Dr. Atkinson he was my mentor. He was very supportive of my issues with being a mother. He realized I needed to be there for them, so he accommodated me quite a bit in terms of letting me take off work if I had to take them to the doctor's office. My ex-husband was, "Well, I'm working." And I said, "I'm working now, too. You've got to take off, because I don't have any more leave." You had to take annual leave. You couldn't take sick leave if you went to the doctor with your child.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Always at the worst time, never at the right time.

COX: Yes. He was very supportive, and I appreciated him for that. Of course, me getting my degree, too. Over in the other office, they didn't talk about it. It was just one of these things. He was very engaged in, "What are you taking this semester? What are you doing?" He showed an interest in it, so I really appreciated him being supportive, not just of going to school. One time I told him, I said, "I got a paper due, and I can't get it done." He says, "Well, what are you doing between midnight and six?" I said, "Well, I'm sleeping, usually." It was just a little humor.

ROSS-NAZZAL: What do you think were your strengths as a manager?

COX: I tried to engage people and help them. My employees, they always said I was the best manager in the world. I tried to help them, and we worked together on how we could get things done, and I listened to them. I think that's what you have to do as a manager. You can't just say, "Do this and do that, and I don't want to talk about it anymore, just get it done."

Here is a certificate of a class in management that I went to at the University of California, Los Angeles for a week. It was great!

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's nice. Prestigious university, too.

COX: I've got a whole box of stuff at home, and so does my husband. He had a really interesting career in being a technician. He designed the microchips. They wanted to do that on Mercury and all the missions that were sending astronauts up, because they were worried about the weight of

everything, so they wanted to reduce everything down. He worked on this design for a microchip. Then they had to get the contractor to do it. He had a microtelescope over in building five, and he reduced everything down and made it into a microchip. It was one of the first microchips they used. It was big. They used it on the space program. One of the astronauts wanted to take the Bible to the Moon, and so they reduced the Old Testament down to a microfiche.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, I remember reading about that.

COX: Three by five.

ROSS-NAZZAL: So he did that?

COX: He was working on that, too, yes. They had to take pictures and put them up on the wall, and take pictures of them, and then reduce it all down. He said it took forever. But they did it so the astronaut would have a Bible going to the Moon.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's great.

COX: Yes. It was a real interesting time. He had lots of stories to tell.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I bet. So many people who worked out at JSC did amazing stuff. Unfortunately, we have a small staff, but everybody's got a great story to tell.

COX: Oh, yes. He loved the job. It was a great time for him.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, I haven't encountered anybody who's told me they didn't like their job at NASA.

COX: Yes. It was a challenge at times, but I met a lot of interesting people I never would have met before. The astronauts, they're just people like everybody else.

ROSS-NAZZAL: That's true. That's very true. Well, I wasn't sure if you wanted to look at your notes, if there was anything we didn't touch on.

COX: Let's see.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I figured we touched on the questions in different ways.

COX: We talked about the minority and women astronauts, and 1977 International Women's Conference that was held in Houston. Yes, I talked about the EEO Councils. Some of yours, like the thing about Dan [Daniel S.] Goldin, he was just the administrator. I don't remember Dan Goldin.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I wasn't really sure.

COX: He was an outsider. Usually, they selected administrators who worked in the system, and most people at NASA didn't like him. It's a political appointment. We didn't monitor other federal agencies at all, not even the contractors. We couldn't talk to the contractors—they had a contract, so whatever was in the contract was what they did. As an EEO officer, I couldn't tell a contractor what to do. Anita Hill, that didn't even come up.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, I was trying to think about what I thought were some of the bigger moments.

COX: I remember them vividly.

ROSS-NAZZAL: Yes, those hearings.

COX: I retired willingly, because I was ready to retire. My husband is 11 years older than me, so I wanted to have time with him in retirement. We've had a nice retirement; we've really enjoyed our retirement years. We traveled a lot, and went to different countries, and had an RV at one time, and went to Alaska. It's been a good retirement. I probably wouldn't have been able to afford it if I'd retired as a GS-5 clerk typist or whatever. So I appreciate NASA very much.

ROSS-NAZZAL: I appreciate you coming in to talk with me today. It was fun.

[End of interview]